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Bucher Is Told He Faces Trial In Ship Seizure

By a Washington Post Staff Writer

CORONADO, Calif., Jan. 22—Cmdr. Lloyd M. Bucher of the Pueblo was told by a Naval court of inquiry today that he may be court-martialed for allowing North Koreans to board his ship.

The Pueblo skipper got this word in an afternoon break of the court but said he wanted to go right on giving his side of the story, even though the testimony may be used against him later.

Until today, Bucher was only a "party" to the court proceedings. His testimony was to help the court get the full facts; not to prepare charges against Bucher or anybody else connected with the seizure of the Pueblo last Jan. 23.

But after Bucher had told the court of inquiry how he had let the North Koreans come aboard the Pueblo without firing a shot to stop them, the court called a recess.

Navy Regulation Cited

Capt. William R. Newsome, the lawyer representing the five admirals who comprise the court, notified Bucher that he was suspected now of breaking Navy Regulation 1730.

That regulation reads: "The commanding officer shall not permit his command to be searched by any person representing a foreign state nor permit any of the personnel under his command to be removed from the command by such person, so long as he has the power to resist."

Bucher, according to Navy spokesmen here, told the court he did not have the power to resist. He chose to go on with his testimony. He is expected to resume Thursday.

What the change in Bucher's status means is that he may be recommended for a court-martial rather than a medal. The character of this proceeding at the naval amphibious base here has therefore changed, even though it is still technically an "inquiry"

A Skipper Takes On 'The System'

By George C. Wilson
Washington Post Staff Writer

CORONADO, Calif., Jan. 22—A first chapter of one of the many books coming out of the Pueblo inquiry might be called Bucher vs. U.S. Navy or Boys Town vs. Annapolis.

The opening days of the Naval court of inquiry here on the capture of the spy ship Pueblo a year ago Thursday make it clear that "the mustang"—an officer who moves up from the

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ranks rather than graduating from the Naval Academy—is taking on "the system."

Nobody can really win this fight—least of all the 41-year-old skipper of the Pueblo, Cmdr. Lloyd M. Bucher. And nothing can be the same after the fight, either.

Bucher, the man, cannot plead guilty to making no real attempt to save his ship. And the Navy, the service, cannot plead guilty to sending a skipper into hostile waters with a ship too rickety for its mission.

But somebody has to take the rap for the Pueblo disaster.

Bucher, on the first day of the inquiry, managed to shift the focus of blame from himself to the ship the Navy gave him to command. The steering was outrageously unreliable, the Pueblo was top heavy to the point Bucher worried about it capsizing and all his pleas for a system for destroying the secret gear and equipment on the spy ship got nowhere.

The five glittering admirals sitting on the elevated, green-baize table at the front of the small hearing room did not enjoy that testimony at all. One could

rather than a "trial."

Legal Risks Ignored

The fact that Bucher decided so quickly to keep testifying, legal risks notwithstanding, indicates a willingness to square off with the Navy brass on the issue of surrendering the Pueblo.

His case hinges on the contention that he did everything within reason to carry out his assigned mission and then made the logical decision when his crew was threatened with "complete slaughter" by North Korean gunboats.

This afternoon's questioning by the admirals on the court showed the Navy is far from convinced at this point that

See PUEBLO, A16, Col. 1

See BUCHER, A16, Col. 4

PUEBLO, From A1

Bucher had no choice but to hand over the Pueblo to the North Koreans.

The admirals brought out that despite sailing through salvo after salvo of North Korean fire, the Pueblo was not burning, leaking or experiencing any problems with its engines or steering.

Bucher, in describing that tragic afternoon on the high seas off Wonsan, said that every time he tried to break his ship out of the ring of four North Korean torpedo boats and one subchaser the enemy gunners would open up on him.

He made one run at full speed to get farther out to sea, taking 57-millimeter cannon fire and raking by 30-caliber machinegun. One crewman was mortally wounded as a shell exploded in his hip, Bucher testified.

"I decided to surrender the ship," Bucher told the court with no note of emotion or apology in his voice.

Crew Opposition Hinted

Court attorney Newsome, in a question that hints there may be truth in rumors here that some of the Pueblo crew opposed the surrender decision, asked Bucher whether he had counseled with the fellow officers about giving up the ship.

"That was my decision," Bucher said with an emphasis that broke his voice out of its usual monotone.

Vice Admiral Harold G. Bowen Jr., president of the Court of Inquiry, asked Bucher if he had ever issued orders to his men to repel boarders.

"They were never issued during our capture," Bucher said.

Were small arms ever broken out, Rear Adm. Allen A. Bergner of the court asked.

"No sir, they were not," Bucher replied.

Then Bergner asked Bucher

to explain why he decided to surrender the Pueblo.

"My feeling was we would be helplessly riddled and sustain an inordinate number of casualties which would prevent the destruction of classified material, and that was my only concern."

That answer seemed to shift the emphasis from the lives of his men to the secret material aboard the spy ship.

Other questions by the admirals brought out that during his encounter with the North Korean gunboats Bucher had never gone beyond full speed to flank speed for fear of burning out the engines and had kept his men below deck so they could keep out of enemy fire while destroying secret documents and equipment.

Flank speed would have meant going 13.1 knots instead of the 12.6 knots of full speed, a debatable difference given the capability of the Soviet-built P-4 torpedo boats to go 50 knots and the sub chaser over 20 knots.

No Hands to Man Guns

Keeping men below deck meant no hands manning the two machine guns, one mounted on the stern and a portable one on the bow.

The obvious thrust of this and other questions was whether Bucher, as skipper of the Pueblo, has done everything possible to avoid the capture of the ship. Was he powerless to resist the North Koreans? That is emerging as the central question.

Bucher told the court yesterday how, when he failed to obey the orders of an SO-1 sub chaser to heave to, the boat fired at him from the port quarter.

Shell fragments knocked him to the deck of the flying bridge where he was commanding the Pueblo, inflicting seven minor wounds (he counted them by rolling down his black sock when asked the number by a reporter during a court recess) in his leg and painful one in the buttocks.



Associated Press

Cmdr. Lloyd Bucher and Mrs. Bucher arrive at Naval court in Coronado, Calif.

Russell Eyes Higher Ups in Pueblo Blame

Associated Press

Sen. Richard B. Russell (D-Ga.) says if testimony is upheld charging the USS Pueblo was inadequately equipped for defense and destruction of secret equipment, "then someone higher up in the line of command has been guilty of a very grave dereliction of duty."

Russell, chairman of the Senate Appropriations Committee, said that testimony by the Pueblo's captain, Cmdr. Lloyd M. Bucher, at a Navy court of inquiry indicates "a tragic mixture of errors" in outfitting the ship.

"I do not want to prejudge this testimony," Russell said in an interview. "This is the statement of one man and perhaps the Navy has some satisfactory reply to it."

"But if what Bucher says is substantiated, then someone higher up in the line of command has been guilty of a very grave dereliction of duty."

The Georgia Senator said it may be closing the barn door after the horse, but his Appropriations Committee will now insist on installation of destruction equipment on all intelligence craft.

He said he will propose that fighter planes capable of flying 1200 miles an hour be maintained within range of the ships for defense in case of attack.

BUCHER, From A1

sense it in the overheated auditorium. The admiral's questions soon showed their strategy for the counterattack.

Did Bucher feel pressured to leave Japan early and take the Pueblo out on her mission? After all the problems with the Pueblo at the shipyard and in sailing from Washington State to Japan, did the skipper feel his ship and his crew were not up to the mission? and, did Bucher write another letter to Navy superiors just before he left Japan requesting destruct devices?

"No, sir," Bucher answered each time. The admirals were clubbing Bucher with the obvious weapon—the centuries-old understanding that the captain, and nobody else, is in charge of his ship. If Bucher as captain did not think his ship was up to her mission, then he should not have taken her out.

No admiral came right out and said it. This is a gentlemanly inquisition where Bucher stands hour after hour on the Navy gold rug explaining himself. But the message comes through loud and clear.

The stiletto flashes out from the dark blue row of

admirals' coats up on the dias only occasionally.

One time was when Rear Adm. Allen A. Bergner asked if it were possible that Bucher's worries about the Pueblo's stability were the "mental hazard" of a submariner taking command of a surface ship. Bucher admitted this was possible.

Another time, Rear Adm. Edward E. Grimm, after listening to Bucher explain that he was afraid scuttling the Pueblo in 180 feet of water would enable the North Koreans to recover the secret material, asked the skipper if he thought the North Koreans had "more right to salvage a ship in international waters than we did."

Bucher replied: "That did not enter my mind."